

THE CHURCH WE NEED

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The church we need is one that gives us a taste of what it would have been like to walk the dusty roads of Israel with the church's Founder. While we will never find a church as perfect as He was, and while there is no such thing as a church where members walk on water, we need to find a church that sees people the way He did.

As we look for that kind of church, there is something to keep in mind: A wise proverb says, "A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb, but to a hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet" (Prov. 27:7). Only when we are broken and emptied of our own self-sufficiency will we value other imperfect, broken people who have found in the church, the body of Christ, a genuine source of forgiveness, honesty, and love.

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CHANGING PATTERNS OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

According to news releases from the University of Michigan, there is a relationship between the frequency of church attendance and the economy. A “world values” survey conducted by the Institute For Social Research shows that church attendance has been declining in 15 of 19 industrialized democracies. The same report shows that church attendance is up in countries experiencing economic difficulty and political uncertainty. This pattern is seen in the percentage of adults in church once a week:

- 89% in Nigeria
- 44% in USA
- 84% in Ireland
- 16% in Switzerland
- 68% in Philippines

4% in Sweden

Political scientist and institute researcher Ronald Inglehart notes, however, that lack of church attendance doesn't mean lack of interest in life's deeper issues. People in affluent nations still ask religious questions, but they look for the answers outside the church. This appears to be an extension of the spirit of self-sufficiency: “If I can make a good living by myself, I can find the answers to life's big questions on my own.” The result is a society of religious individualists where too many of us shop in a sort of worldview boutique looking for a personalized philosophy of life that will dull the pain in our hearts.

With fat wallets and anorexic souls, we plod on sad and lonely—only mildly curious about the churches we bypass Sunday after Sunday.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL SUPPORT

While a church is far more than a mere circle of supportive friends with mutual interests, an effective personal support group often exemplifies the positive interdependence that characterizes the healthy church. Consider Alcoholics Anonymous. Imagine how effective AA would be if members came to meetings all dressed up, but with no admission of need? What if there were no sponsors for those who asked for help? What if AA was known for condemning those who abused alcohol, and for being a fellowship of former drinkers who had successfully kicked the habit? What if mature members had no interest in telling their own story or in

reaching out to the needs of those whose lives are still out of control?

It's important to remember that AA founders patterned their 12-step program after spiritual principles of the church. From the first-step admission of need to the last steps of commitment to help those whose lives are still out of control, AA is patterned after principles that are familiar to followers of Christ. Yet, what AA founders once learned from the church, the church now needs to re-learn from them.

Followers of Christ are called to carry out the mission of Christ, of whom it is said, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (Jn. 3:17). This is the mission of those who know what it means to be broken, loved, and forgiven.

WHAT KIND OF CHURCH DO WE NEED?

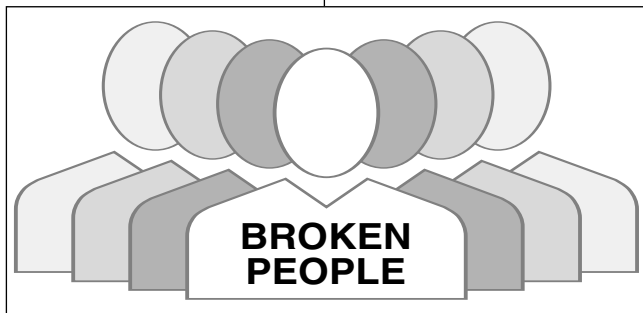
Healthy churches are made up of needy people. To think otherwise is to misunderstand the nature and mission of the church.

To see why this is true, let's take a look at seven different kinds of people who help to make up the kind of church we need.

A CHURCH FOR BROKEN PEOPLE

them to come to the hospital. None of them know why they are there. Upon arriving and checking in, each is asked to have a seat. When they ask nervously whether a member of their family has been admitted, the answer is, "The doctor will be with you shortly." Finally, the doctor appears, assures the group that nothing is wrong, and asks each person to make a contribution to the hospital building fund.

In some ways that is how out of place broken people



Picture an emergency room filled with people. All of them received a call asking

feel in a typical church meeting. They may attend meetings because they know

others want or expect them to be there. But inside of themselves nothing really makes sense. What they understand is that at some point in the service, the church is going to ask them to make a contribution. They'd rather be somewhere else.

Broken people have gotten a taste of what it means to have come to the end of themselves.

Broken people are more at home in a healthy church because they have gotten a taste of what it means to have come to the end of themselves. They can identify with the one who prayed, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk. 18:13), and with the one who wrote, "We were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so

that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God" (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

Those who have been broken know that in many ways they are like those who seek help to deal with family problems, emotional trauma, eating disorders, or substance abuse. They understand the warning of the author of Hebrews when he said:

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear

His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (Heb. 3:12-15).

When we go back and include the context of the verses that come before, we see needs and dangers worthy of a spiritual support group. These dangers include . . .

- the danger of a hard heart (v.8).
- the danger of spiritual drifting (v.10).
- the danger of grieving God (vv.10-11).
- the danger of missing God’s approval (v.11).
- the danger of turning away from God (v.12).
- the danger of being deceived (v.13).

It is because of such pitfalls that the author warned his readers to help and encourage one another daily. Then later in the book he reemphasized the need for helping one another when he wrote:

Let us hold fast the

confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (10:23-25).

Spiritually broken people realize the importance of these needs. They have been humbled to the point of seeing that the most important values in life are their faith, their love, and their hope in God. They have learned that they were not made to walk with the Lord without the help of others.

If we don’t keep reminding one another of all that is at stake, church will seem like a hospital emergency room that isn’t needed.

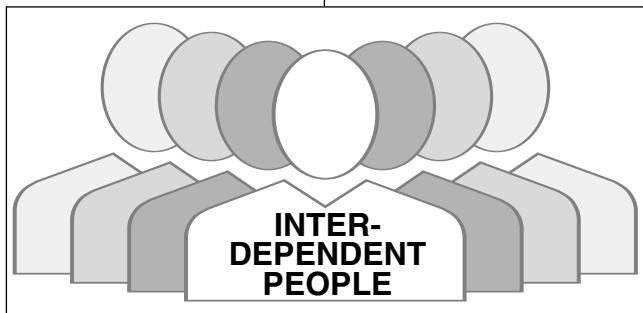
Questions for personal or group study

1. Why are broken people more likely to admit needs that others are still denying?
2. What is the relationship between Hebrews 3:7-19 and Hebrews 10:25?
3. Why do broken people need the church?
4. Why do healthy churches need broken people?

A CHURCH FOR INTERDEPENDENT PEOPLE

meaning, the little one learns that independence is a major goal in life. “I am a grown-up when I can do it all by myself.”

But the kind of church we need is made up of people who say, “I am not mature until I realize how much I need others.” The idea of rugged individualism is truly foreign to the church. The sooner we realize that each member needs every other member, the closer we will come to the ideal church.



America is typified by the rugged individualist. As soon as a child is old enough to comprehend language and

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, the apostle Paul asked how much sense it would make if various parts of the

human body spoke up and indicated a lack of need for the other parts. Behind the apostle's smile is the thought that God doesn't just put body parts together but church bodies as well. It's an idea that requires our faith. Even though the interdependence of all church members is not as obvious as the interdependence of the parts of the human body, Paul wrote:

By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? . . . God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. . . . And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of

the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. . . . But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually (1 Cor. 12:13-27).

We find reason to accept our dependence on one another when we choose to believe that . . .

- the Spirit has joined us together (v.13).
- we are members of the same body (v.13).
- we need one another (v.21).
- when one suffers, we all suffer (v.26).
- when one is honored, we all rejoice (v.26).

According to Paul, God is the one who has made us dependent on one another.

If the apostle is right, then members of the church are never justified in feeling they can go it alone, that they

*Members of
the church are
never justified in
feeling they can
go it alone.*

are more important than others, or that they deserve more honor or attention. From pastor to parking lot attendant to the quiet prayer partner, all are considered essential by the Spirit.

God has given every member of His body a role that pleases Him (1 Cor. 12:18). Our assignment may not please us, but our role pleases God. His placements are made according to His plan for a body of people He loves. Lovingly, the Lord uses His

perfect wisdom to give the members of His body an opportunity to love and care for one another.

Into the mix of this body, God places rich and poor, pastor-teacher, choir member, prayer warrior, missionary, custodian, youth worker. In each case, He exercises His option to put us in a role that is comparable to the eye, ear, nose, mouth, hand, elbow, or foot. Then He asks us to believe by faith that every one of His children is a gifted, important, carefully placed member of His body.

God considers every role in the church to be honorable, regardless of the public attention it gets (1 Cor. 12:23-24). Some parts of the human body get much more public attention than other parts. That's the fact that inspires the glamor industry. But the truth is that it is often our unrepresentable

parts that are most critical to the life of the body. God is clearly not pleased when members of the church give greater honor to those with the highly visible responsibilities than to those who remain behind the scenes. Witness the chaos that results when the church nursery director resigns!

God has given every member of His body a specific role to fulfill. We may not be able to see or understand all the ways we need one another. We may not be able to prove whether each member has been given only one or more than one spiritual gift. We may wonder whether our gifts can actually change, depending on our circumstances. But many of these questions don't need an answer as long as we have the right attitude toward one another.

This is why Paul went on in 1 Corinthians 12 to say

that there is a more important subject than who gets what gift (1 Cor. 12:27-31). Most important is who is loving whom (1 Cor. 12:31–13:13). The major point of the body-life discussed in chapter 12 is made in chapter 13. The real impact of seeing that we are interdependent members of the same body must show up in our attitudes toward one another. The gift of crowd-pleasing eloquence, the gift of mountain-moving faith, the gift of mystery-solving knowledge, the gift of sacrificial giving to feed the poor—these gifts amount to nothing without love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). What is important to our God is whether we are caring for and helping one another. Paul wrote:

Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (v.3).

Questions for personal or group study

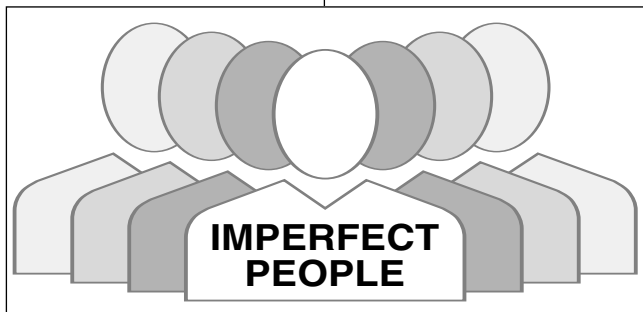
1. How are humility and interdependence related? (1 Cor. 12:12-13,22-25).
2. What do we learn from the context about the body-life discussion of 1 Corinthians 12?
3. What if people don't know what their gifts are? (1 Cor. 12:18,31; 13:1-13).
4. What actions could a church take to operate according to the principles of 1 Corinthians 12?

A CHURCH FOR IMPERFECT PEOPLE

challenge can be about as enjoyable as trying to hug a cactus. Nothing you do is ever quite right. Appreciation is rarely expressed. Criticism follows criticism. You can't really relax because the job is never finished. Everything is incomplete.

Perfectionists see the importance of getting things right. But what they don't understand is how to live gracefully with their own imperfections and those of others.

Some of us who would not think of ourselves as



People who live with perfectionists say that the

perfectionists are miserably compulsive when it comes to

our churches. We are far too critical, far too demanding of others who are in reality no worse than ourselves. We have a poor memory when it comes to our own faults and need of forgiveness. We would do well to spend some thoughtful time reading Matthew 18:21-35.

Perfectionists don't understand how to live gracefully with their own imperfections and those of others.

Even the best churches are made up entirely of imperfect people. Every member, if he is marked by spiritual understanding, has been humbled by his own sense of sin and failure. Every member is like the recovering alcoholic who knows he will always be

tempted to fall back into his old habits. Every member struggles daily with the old ways of self-centeredness, self-sufficiency, pride, and an inclination to return insult for insult.

In 1 John 1:5-2:4, the apostle John gave us a realistic picture of ourselves. From what he said, we can conclude that we are an imperfect people who must deal honestly with our imperfections before one another and our perfect Lord.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and

just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 Jn. 1:6–2:1).

Here we find reason to believe that our imperfect church relationships must be grounded in . . .

- a shared belief in Christ's perfection (vv.5-6).
- a shared honesty about ourselves (vv.6-7).
- a shared awareness of our sin (vv.8,10).
- a shared need for confession and forgiveness (vv.7,9).
- a shared desire for righteousness (2:1).
- a shared reliance on the cross of Christ (2:1-2).
- a shared need to be

obedient (2:3-4).

In writing about our imperfection, John is both idealistic and realistic. He urged us not to make bad choices. But he also showed us that when we do wrong there are right ways to respond.

Seeing the extent of our own imperfection is basic to good church relationships.

- (1) It keeps us honest,
- (2) it encourages personal humility and respect for all people (Ti. 3:1-3), and
- (3) it gives reason to be merciful toward the wrongs of others as we strive to be right with God (Mt. 5:6-7).

There's nothing worse than someone who is growing in spiritual discernment but then turns in proud criticism against those who haven't come as far as he has. Imperfect as we are, we have no basis for pride or self-righteousness. To become better is to become more merciful and loving.

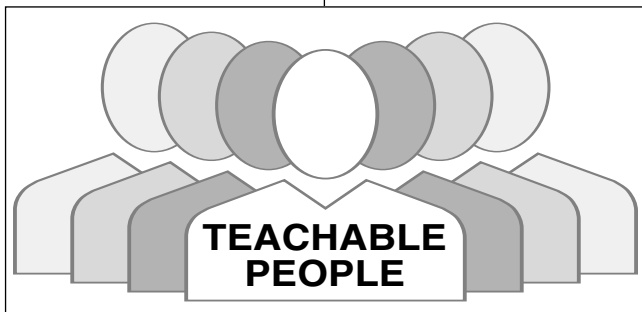
Questions for personal or group study

1. Why are perfectionists apt to have trouble in their relationships?
2. How does 1 John 1:6–2:4 help us to achieve balance in dealing with the pursuit of perfection?
3. What can churches do to resolve the tension between the mercy of Matthew 5:6-7 and the confrontations of Matthew 18:21-35?

A CHURCH FOR TEACHABLE PEOPLE

educated that they are no longer able to relate to the needs of their students. Imagine a school of learning where only the brightest minds are able to rise to the academic heights of professors who are self-absorbed with their own credentials, research, and efforts to be recognized in respected academic journals. Imagine classes where students want to learn, and need to learn, but where they are treated as if they should already be at the level of their teachers.

Relate that to the church.



Picture a college where the professors are so highly

New believers are spiritually uneducated and anxious to

learn. They don't yet know that the Ark of the Covenant couldn't have housed one ostrich, let alone elephants and zebras. They don't know who Zephaniah was, let alone where to find him. They are at a loss to know how to "bless the Lord," "edify one another," "walk circumspectly," "confess their transgressions," "sanctify themselves," "pray without ceasing," or "give themselves to God as a sweet-smelling sacrifice."

Such people are usually teachable. They know they are illiterate when it comes to trying to understand the language of the Bible. What they need, however, is a small group or one-to-one attention. They need someone to help them learn at their own level and at their own rate.

The apostle Paul understood that the church exists for the education of people who need to learn a

new language of love, a new philosophy, a new logic, a new history, a new sociology, a new music, and a new view of relationships.

In what Paul wrote, we see the church's challenge to bring spiritually uneducated people into the light. He had in mind the needs of people coming out of darkness (Eph. 4:17-18) when he wrote:

He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning

craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ (Eph. 4:11-15).

God gives the gift of teaching to some in the church because of the need for a new understanding and thinking that . . .

- equips us to serve (v.12).
- builds relationships (v.12).
- encourages unity (v.13).
- leads to Christlikeness (v.13).
- provides stability (v.14).
- fights deception (v.14).
- speaks truth in love (v.15).

Our need is not for a knowledge of what is novel, speculative, and arguable. Our mission in the church is to help one another see the difference biblical thinking can make in the disappointments of home life, in the insecurities of the workplace, in the

apprehensions of the doctor's office, and in the occasional fractures of relationships. The purpose of the gift of teaching in the church is to actively bring the immature to understand what it means to have the mind of Christ—the characteristic of spiritual maturity that enables us to find grace and hope even in the most difficult circumstances.

Without a teaching spirit on the part of the mature, and without a teachable spirit on the part of the immature, we will have a knowledge that puffs up rather than builds up (1 Cor. 8:1-3).

Questions for personal or group study

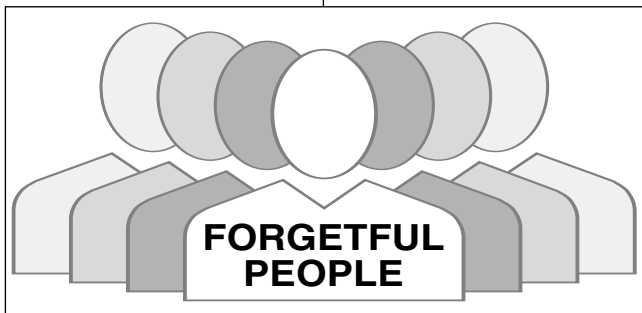
1. When does education become self-serving? (1 Cor. 8:1-3).
2. What is the goal of church education? (Eph. 4:11-15; Col. 1:28-29).
3. What can churches

do to make sure they are meeting entry-level people where they are rather than where the rest of the church is?

A CHURCH FOR FORGETFUL PEOPLE

remember significant dates and anniversaries.

This is not our world. Ours is a world where people of brilliance, education, and genius habitually forget basic common sense.



Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world where people never forget anything they want to remember? Students would not have to review their notes before exams. A husband would not forget to be thoughtful, affectionate, and understanding of his wife's needs. Friends would not forget to make phone calls, write letters, or

This is what the apostle Paul also acknowledged when he taught a young leader named Titus how to help the church. He wrote:

Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once

foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men (Ti. 3:1-5,8; see also Heb. 3:12-14).

This is the church in action. It shows that the people of God don't always need to learn something new. We often need to be reminded of what we already know. We often forget who we are, how we got that way, and how we should now live.

- We forget to respect secular authority (v.1).
- We forget to be ready to help others (v.1).
- We forget to not speak evil of anyone (v.2).
- We forget to be peaceable (v.2).
- We forget to be gentle (v.2).
- We forget to show humility to all (v.2).
- We forget we were once foolish (v.3).
- We forget we were saved by grace (vv.4-7).

Forgetful people often need to help one another in memory basics. In a timely, gentle way we need to remind one another to remember the Lord, His love, and His ability to lead us through the jungles, deserts, swamps, mountains, oceans, valleys, and thorn patches of life.

Questions for personal or group study

1. Is "out of sight out of mind" more or less

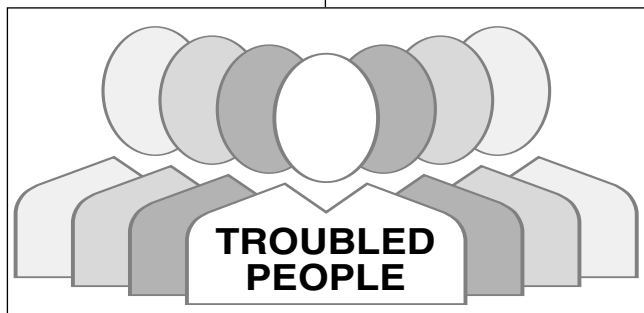
significant when it comes to spiritual matters?

2. According to Paul, what are the people of God prone to forget? (Ti. 3:1-8).
3. According to Hebrews 3:12-13, what is the relationship between sin and memory?
4. What can we do to make sure we are giving due consideration to our forgetfulness?

A CHURCH FOR TROUBLED PEOPLE

optimum condition. On-staff wellness advisors provide carefully monitored exercise, diet, and stress-reduction clinics. Daily classes are held for different ages and special-interest groups. Room after room of exercise equipment, spas, pools, and lecture facilities are available to help people get into excellent physical condition.

Why this club looks so efficient, however, is that those who aren't meeting the ideal standards are kicked



Picture a health club where all the members are committed to keeping their bodies and minds in

out. Quickest to lose membership are those who develop heart disease, cancer, or any other serious

illness. People who get a bit hefty are likewise removed and their club keys called in.

The church was never meant to be a place serving only those who are well-disciplined, “ideal” believers.

The church Christ is building is different. It was never meant to be a place serving only those who are well-disciplined, “ideal” believers. From the beginning, our Lord showed concern for those who weren’t cutting it. The apostle Paul carried on the same concern when he wrote:

God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ

Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing. . . . warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all (1 Th. 5:9,11,14-15).

This kind of commitment to imperfect people doesn’t come naturally. What comes naturally is angry impatience toward those who either trouble us or demand a disproportionate amount of our time. We fear they’ll drag us down faster than we can lift them up. Yet Paul reminded us of something very significant. He said that our Savior has marked us out to receive His rescue—not His wrath (v.9). Paul went on to say that we are to show the same pattern of comfort and

helpfulness toward others (v.11). This isn't easy. We are so inclined to become frustrated and angry with those who make demands on our time and material resources. Yet the challenge in Christ is *not to respond in anger* but to be found . . .

- respecting faithful leaders (vv.12-13).
- warning the unruly (v.14).
- comforting the fearful (v.14).
- helping the weak (v.14).
- showing patience toward all (v.14).
- not returning evil for evil (v.15).
- seeking the good of all (v.15).

The Spirit of Christ will direct us not merely to the well and robust among us, nor to those who are self-supporting and untroubled. He will compel us to sacrifice for those who are weak and in need of our

encouragement, comfort, and support.

Jesus did not come to help good people. He was not a doctor who came to help the healthy. Jesus came to save sinners, "to preach the gospel to the poor. . . . to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lk. 4:18).

Jesus showed the sympathies of His own heart when He said that on some future day of judgment He would raise the issue of what people did in the face of human misery. To some, He will say:

Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was

naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. . . . I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me (Mt. 25:34-36,40).

We don't need to agree about all of the prophetic details of this judgment described in Matthew 25. That's another issue.

God's plan is to use the church to meet the needs of hurting people.

What we can agree on is that this passage reflects our Lord's timeless concern for troubled people. That has never changed. We can be sure, therefore, that His plan is to use His church, His

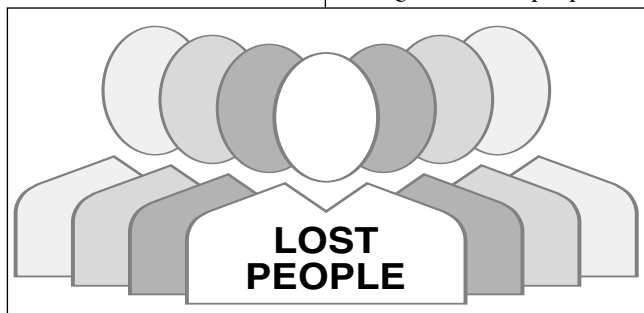
body, to meet the needs of hurting people. We can be sure that His plan is to build a spiritual health club that is open not only to the well and healthy but also to the sick and dying.

Questions for personal or group study

1. How do God's actions toward us as described in 1 Thessalonians 5:9 support the kind of care-giving called for in verses 14 and 15?
2. How can church members know whether they are avoiding fellowship with someone for selfish reasons or loving reasons? (Ti. 3:8-11).
3. In what sense does the concept of "the body of Christ" keep intensely troubled people from overburdening the church?

A CHURCH FOR LOST PEOPLE

they are wandering aimlessly through life. Most people



What are the characteristics of a lost person? Think about the lost child wandering helplessly in the woods, the life-rafted survivors of a plane lost at sea, or the elderly Alzheimer's patient who has walked away from his home on a cold, dark night. Lost people are cut off from help and resources. They don't know where they are. They don't know how to find shelter, protection, and provisions. Lost, disoriented people need help.

Most people are lost. Most don't know where they are, who they are, or why

don't know that they have come from the God of Adam, Abraham, and David. Most don't know how to find this God. Most don't know that there is a real heaven where relatively few people are going, and a real hell where the majority will lose everything they ever dreamed of having. Most people don't know where to turn for real help.

Most will die like the rich man Jesus described in Luke 16. There, with a pathetic picture of regret, Jesus described a conversation between the deceased rich

man and his ancestor Abraham. The two were pictured as being separated from each other by a great gulf. Jesus related the conversation that occurred as the rich man cried out:

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus [a deceased beggar who ended up in paradise with Abraham] that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” But Abraham said, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.” Then he said, “I beg you therefore,

father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.” Abraham said to him, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” But he said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Lk. 16:24-31).

Notice how many profoundly disturbing insights this passage gives concerning the lost. It shows us how pathetic their condition really is. Christ helps us see through the highly temporary appearances of material well-being. He gives us a glimpse into the irreversible

and miserable condition of the lost that shows why they need help and warning before it is too late. He shows us that . . .

- The lost may not look like they are lost (v.19).
- The lost may not feel they are lost (v.19).
- The lost may look enviable (vv.19-21).
- The lost will end up in torment (vv.23-24).
- The lost will plead for mercy (v.24).
- The lost will find no relief (vv.25-26).
- The lost will not be able to warn others (vv.27-31).

Prior to the coming of Christ, lost people had the message of Moses and the prophets. Since the coming of the Son of God, lost people have needed to hear that He died for their sins, that He was buried, and that He rose from the dead to give all who would believe in Him the gift of heaven and escape from the fires of hell.

Try to imagine what it would be like to be the lost man of Luke 16. Imagine what degree of urgency and importance you would

***Search the universe,
the backside of
every star, the floor
of every ocean,
the top of every
mountain. Find one
truth more urgent
than that of your
eternal destiny.***

attach to the church once you had moved from this world to the next. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you then rate the importance of the church, your country club, your favorite watering hole, your office, the Alaskan hunting trip, or the comforts of a living room

and cable-connected television set?

Lost people desperately need the church—more than a lost person at sea needs a search plane. God has given certain people in His church a special ability to communicate Christ to a lost world (Eph. 4:11). God has given His church the responsibility of spreading His message of grace and rescue throughout the world

Who is going to offer the people of the world an alternative to their lost condition?

(Mt. 28:19-20). He has empowered His church to go to the rescue in His strength (Acts 1:8). He has equipped His body to provide loving support to every lost person who accepts the gospel of

salvation (1 Th. 5:11-18).

Without a church organized for such a mission, who is going to offer the people of the world an alternative to their lost condition? If the church doesn't tell them of a real heaven and a real hell, who will? (Rev. 20:11-15).

Questions for personal or group study

1. How is one who is spiritually lost like someone who is physically lost? How is he different?
2. What specific elements did Jesus include in Luke 16:19-31 to show the terror of lostness?
3. What is the most persistent and difficult fact about a lost person's condition? (vv.27-31).
4. What can the church do to show that it is existing not only for itself but also for those Christ loves—for those not yet in the fold?

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HISTORY?

In His last recorded words, the resurrected Lord of the church sent personalized messages to seven first-century churches. In these short missives, the Lord of the church (1) drew attention to some specific aspect of His own character that each church needed to see, (2) noted praiseworthy characteristics in them, (3) pointed out problems that were threatening their effectiveness and relationship to Him, (4) encouraged the continuation of good traits, (5) called for repentance in specific areas of need, (6) warned those who would not listen, and (7) gave promise of success to those who listened to Him.

The Busy Church Of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7).

This was a church marked by hard work, doctrinal

discernment, and perseverance. In all of her activity, however, this church had lost the love that marked her origins. The church had apparently become more interested in working hard and in marking out false teachers than in loving Christ. This is a subtle problem that should be taken to heart by the busy, doctrinally conservative churches of our own day. If not corrected, this loss of compassion could result in the Lord's decision to shut down this branch of His church.

This shows that we need to be a part of a church whose members are always renewing their love for Christ.

The Suffering Church Of Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11).

This was one of two churches not reprimanded in any way. Instead, the Lord encouraged and comforted her members in the suffering

they would endure for Him. He assured them that even though they appeared poor, they were actually rich in Him. To comfort them, He called attention to Himself as the Resurrected One. He assured them that even though they would be severely tested, and even though many would die for Him, they had much to look forward to. He promised that they would not be hurt by the second death, which would eventually consume their enemies. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church that is willing to endure hardship in the light of eternity.*

The Bad-Neighborhood Church Of Pergamos (Rev. 2:12-17). This church lived in Satan's neighborhood. She was a troubled church and her members were being tempted by people who were trying to get them to repeat the mistakes of historic

Israel. As the Lord affirmed their faithfulness, He also let them know that they must be very careful not to be misled by compromising relationships. He called their attention to the sword of His own Word and assured them that real satisfaction could only be found by remaining true to Him. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church that honors the Word of God even in the worst environment.*

The Morally-Compromising Church Of Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29). This church seemed to be in worse jeopardy than the church of Pergamos. The Lord acknowledged her love, service, faith, patience, and increasing works. But in spite of her growth, she was living on the edge of disaster. Because she was tolerating a teaching that encouraged sexual idolatry and spiritual compromise, the Lord called attention to

His all-knowing judgment eyes and judgment feet. The people of this church had much to gain by getting rid of this perilous teaching, and much to lose if they didn't. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church whose members maintain a standard of sexual purity.*

The Sleeping Church Of Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6). Here we find a deceptively dangerous situation. The watchful eye of Christ revealed that the true condition of this church was belied by her reputation. She apparently was a church well thought of by Christians in other areas. But while people knew and praised her for her spiritual life, the Lord saw something He called spiritual death.

Many in Sardis were going to sleep on past accomplishments. There was a form of godliness, but it was an empty shell that lacked the power of God.

For this reason, the Lord of the church called attention to His Spirit. He reminded them that unless they woke up out of their externalism, and unless their hearts were renewed in the Spirit of God, they would soon lose their witness. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church that does not maintain a form of godliness while denying God's power.*

The Persevering Church Of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13). These were believers who, along with the church of Smyrna, were not rebuked in any way by the Lord. At the same time, however, the Lord's praise and commendation were quite restrained. She was faintly praised as having "a little strength," and for having remained faithful, for keeping His Word, for not denying the Lord's name, and for persevering.

Most significant about this church was what the

Lord Himself said He was doing for her. Christ called attention to Himself as the One who opened and shut doors of opportunity and assured the church that He would give her an open door through which to walk on His behalf. He also

We need to be a part of a church whose people are not noted as much for their strength as for their faithful dependence on the Lord.

promised this church that He would keep her from the hour of trial that would come upon the whole earth. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church whose people are not noted as much*

for their strength as for their faithful dependence on the Lord.

The Materialistic Church Of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-19).

This notorious group is well-known as the church that was like distasteful water in the Lord's mouth.

The church had taken on the temperature of its environment. Likened to lukewarm water, these people were neither refreshingly cold nor stimulatingly hot.

This neutral condition allowed the Laodiceans to become deceived. They were not bad enough to know they had turned away from dependence on the Lord. Yet they had ceased to draw upon the life and grace of the Lord. Instead, they had assumed a position and condition of satisfaction with the status quo. It appears that commercial prosperity had allowed them to slip into

a kind of spirituality that was totally unacceptable to the Lord.

For this reason, the Lord identified Himself as “the Amen” (the final word), “the Faithful and True Witness” (what He says can be trusted), and “the beginning of the creation of God” (because He created all things, He knows a bad thing when He sees it).

The Lord needed to shame this church. She had been deceived by adapting herself to the material values of the world. Instead of using their wealth for spiritual ends, the Laodiceans used it for personal comfort and luxury. They had become deluded in their affluence.

The Lord assured them that it was only because He loved them that He was speaking so forthrightly to them. It was only because He knew they were not able to see and lacked spiritual

sensitivity that He was appealing to them to repent. *This shows that we need to be a part of a church whose people do not evaluate their condition on the basis of material well-being, but rather on the basis of their dependence on the Lord.*

In summary, what our Lord said to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 contains lessons for us today. One of the applications we can take to heart is to see that we need to be a part of a church . . .

- whose members love Christ.
- whose members have the hope of eternity.
- whose members honor the Word of God.
- whose members maintain sexual purity.
- whose members remain alive in spirit.
- whose members are faithful in witness.
- whose members are not materialistic.

WHERE CAN WE FIND A PERFECT CHURCH?

In one sense, there is no such thing as a perfect church. As we have seen, the churches of the Bible are, by definition, imperfect churches made up of imperfect people who regularly gather together because of their need for their perfect Savior and Lord—and for one another.

In another sense, however, every real church is perfect. According to the Bible, all who believe in Christ are perfect, whole, and complete in Him (Col. 1:28). The perfection they don't have in themselves they receive as a gift from Him. He gives to every member of His church the forgiveness He has purchased with His own blood. He calls us righteous because on the cross He took our sin and made it possible for us to

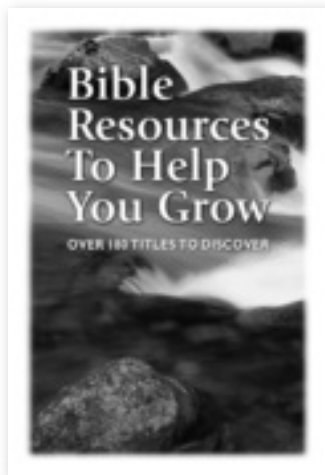
share in the gift of His righteousness. This gift is available to all who . . .

- acknowledge their sin.
- admit their inability to save themselves.
- believe that Jesus Christ died for their sins.
- believe that He rose from the dead.
- receive Him as their personal Savior.

If this isn't your idea of a perfect church, don't look for one. A perfect church is made up of broken, interdependent, imperfect, teachable, forgetful, troubled, formerly lost people. They have no perfection to boast about except what has been graciously given to them as an undeserved gift from God.

Yet this is the church so protected by the cross and power of Christ that the gates of hell cannot and will not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18).

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